

VZCZCXYZ5260
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHJA #0445/01 0640953
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 040953Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY JAKARTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8219
INFO RUEHHS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEHHE/AMEMBASSY HELSINKI 0910
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 2117
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE 3368
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM 2070
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RHHMUNA/USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC

UNCLAS JAKARTA 000445

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MTS, DS/IP/EAP, DS/DSS, INR/EAP and INL
DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS AID
USAID FOR ANE/EAA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [ECON](#) [ASEC](#) [SOCI](#) [ID](#)
SUBJECT: Five ex-GAM killed in Aceh attack

¶1. (U) Summary. In the worst single incident of violence since the signing of the Helsinki Peace MoU, at least 5 former GAM members were killed on March 1 in an attack on a local office in Central Aceh. The attack followed a series of clashes between former-GAM members and supporters of a local gang with minor links to ex-anti-separatist militia. Governor Irwandi has urged all parties to exercise restraint, and GAM commanders have ordered their members to remain calm and avoid "throwing gasoline on the fire." The situation in central Aceh remains calm, but tense. End Summary.

KPA Office Attacked

¶2. (U) Shortly after midnight on March 1, a mob attacked and burned the KPA office in Sangoeh Ilang, Central Aceh, some 30 km from Takengon. (Note: KPA is an organization created by GAM after the Helsinki MoU to represent former GAM members. It is based on the old GAM structure and hierarchy.) Several GAM members were killed in the attack. By mid morning, false rumors spread that KPA members from around the province were coming to Central Aceh to seek revenge, and the police set up roadblocks to keep them out. In the days following the attack the atmosphere in Central Aceh was quiet and tense. Shops in some parts of the city, particularly around the bus station, remained closed throughout the weekend.

How Many Victims?

¶3. (U) There are conflicting reports of the number of people killed in the attack. Provincial authorities cited by the press claim that six people were killed. Meanwhile, Central Aceh Police Chief Agus Kewadar told Consulate Medan that only five persons were killed, four of whom were burned to death and a fifth who died of stab wounds and was dumped in a well. KPA members disagree and insist that the number is actually higher. One KPA member in Takengon told the press that at least nine people were killed and several more severely injured. KPA spokesman Ibrahim KBS in Banda Aceh told Consulate Medan that he could only confirm 5 dead at present but he expected the number to go up because several supporters in central Aceh were not yet accounted for.

Government's Response

¶4. (SBU) Governor Irwandi Yusuf and other provincial officials have called on all parties to remain calm. Provincial Police Chief

Rismawan has promised that justice will be served and asked people to wait for his men to conduct a complete investigation. So far, the only provincial official known to travel to the area is former Governor Azwar Abubakar from the Aceh Reintegration Agency who went to Central Aceh to meet with victims and their families. In Jakarta, staff from the Aceh Desk at the Ministry of Politics and Security told Medan that the ministry would be holding meetings on Tuesday, March 4 to discuss the situation.

Chronology

15. (U) On February 29, after a series of skirmishes between former GAM members (KPA) and a local gang (IPT) over control of the Takengon city bus terminal, the police chiefs from both Central Aceh district and its district capital, Takengon city, invited KPA and IPT members to a meeting to discuss the situation. Before the meeting started, a crowd of IPT supporters attacked the five KPA representatives, beating one of them severely before the police were able to get the situation under control. During the conflict, IPT was closely affiliated with the Pemuda Pancasila youth organization but lacked both weapons and significant political power. Some IPT members were also involved with the anti-separatist militia PETA (Pembela Tanah Air, Defenders of the Homeland).

16. (U) Upon learning of the attack on the five representatives, local KPA sent two truckloads of supporters into the city. Before additional clashes broke out, however, the regent and police chief intervened and convinced both sides to participate in a dialogue. The dialogue continued until after 10:00pm on February 29 and resulted in an agreement to abstain from additional violence. The attack on the KPA office occurred several hours later, shortly after midnight.

KPA's Reaction

17. (SBU) Senior KPA officials insist that they are keeping their men under control and that they are waiting for the police to conduct their investigation. Top KPA commander Muzakir Manaf told consulate Medan that GAM members would have flooded into Central Aceh but he and other commanders had forbidden them from doing so to avoid pouring "gasoline on the fire." Ibrahim KBS, KPA spokesman, added that allowing KPA supporters to go to Takengon would have been a fatal mistake, leading to an unpredictable cycle of violence which could not be controlled. Both Muzakir and Ibrahim told Medan that KPA will wait for the authorities to act. The organization is holding an emergency meeting in Banda Aceh on Tuesday to discuss the incident.

18. (U) In a statement circulated by Ibrahim, KPA leaders took a harsher line. The statement said the attack in Central Aceh was a provocation designed to elicit a strong response which could be used to renew the conflict. They called upon the police to investigate the incident thoroughly, warning that failure to do so could unleash waves of retribution and chaos. Do not be surprised, the statement warned ominously, if the government and the law ultimately fail to act, that other parties resort to unlawful actions themselves.

19. (SBU) The police may find it politically difficult to meet KPA's expectations. KPA clearly blames former PETA members for the attack and expects the police to identify and punish the mastermind behind the act. PETA and the former anti-separatist militias are still powerful in the area (the regent of neighboring Nagan Raya district, for example, was a former militia leader), however, and the police may find it difficult to confront the organization head on. KPA members have long claimed that the police throughout the province refuse to crack down on criminals with ties to the former anti-separatist militia because of their history of cooperation during the conflict. Now, Ibrahim, the KPA spokesman, told Consulate Medan, is the police's chance to prove they are impartial and fair.

Role of the Police

10. (SBU) Although they blame ex-militia for the attack, KPA leaders imply strongly that elements within the police may have been complicit. Specifically, KPA has pointed to several incidents where they accuse the police of either failing to act or acting improperly: at the initial reconciliation meeting when police failed

to prevent KPA members from being assaulted, at the second reconciliation meeting when police ordered KPA to send its supporters out of the city while allowing hundreds of IPT supporters to gather, and during the attack itself. Other observers seem to share that view as well. In the words of Stephen Almsteier, the Safety and Security Coordinator for the Aceh Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Agency, "there would be no need to call for police action now if the armed police at both incidents had taken some sort of action at the time."

¶11. (SBU) Despite evidence to the contrary, authorities are labeling the attack as a simple criminal incident unrelated to other matters and strenuously resist linking the attack to former militia members. District Police Chief Agus Budi Kawedar told Consulate Medan that "there is no connection at all" between the attack on the KPA office and the incidents at the bus terminal. That situation, he said, "has been fully resolved."

¶12. (SBU) Kawedar also disagrees that the police could have done more to prevent the attack. The village where the attack occurred is about 1.5 hours driving from Takengon, he said, and the location only has a small police post with seven personnel. He added that only three police were on duty at the time of the incident on March 1, too few to stand against such a large mob. Kawedar emphasized that his men are conducting a thorough investigation and that they have already located 12 witnesses, including one whose identity has not yet been disclosed. He hopes the motive for the incident can be announced in the next 2 or 3 days.

Impact on the Peace Process

¶13. (SBU) Unless this incident is successfully resolved, it could further erode former combatants' confidence in the police and give them a specific grievance against them. It could also lead ex-GAM in certain areas to seek weapons for self-defense. Gen. Amiruddin, the Ministry of Peace and Security's senior representative in Aceh, told Consulate Medan that he believes the greatest risk right now is that KPA members will carry out revenge attacks, triggering a cycle of retribution which will be hard to stop. His greatest priority, he said, was to support the police and "boost their credibility" so that KPA members did not feel obligated to take matters into their own hands. At the same time, he said, he is communicating quietly with senior KPA representatives to keep them on board with the process.

¶14. (SBU) Some observers are linking this incident with recent initiatives to divide the province. Governor Irwandi Yusuf acknowledged those concerns to the press and cited them as a key reason for the police to conduct a thorough investigation. Numerous KPA/GAM leaders are on record stating that dividing the province would be a grave violation of the Helsinki MoU and that to do so would jeopardize the peace process. Hume